

## Lofgren Calls for Inquiry into Detained Iranian Scientists

Sends Investigation Requests to Department of State and Homeland Security

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Washington, DC – Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-San Jose) today sent the following letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff calling for an investigation into accounts that as many as 100 Iranian scientists, professors, and businessmen planning to attend a conference on earthquakes in Santa Clara, California were denied entry into the country despite having valid visas issued by the U.S. State Department:

August 7, 2006

Dear Secretary Rice and Secretary Chertoff:

I am very concerned that recent press accounts have estimated that as many as 100 Iranian scientists, professors, and businessmen planning to attend a conference on earthquakes in Santa Clara, California were denied entry into the U.S. despite having valid visas issued by the U.S. State Department. The attached report from the August 5, 2006 issue of the San Jose Mercury News presents a disturbing picture of the treatment of these scientists and suggests a significant challenge for the exchange of scientific and life-saving information for our country.

Like California, Iran is no stranger to the death and destruction caused by earthquakes. In California, thousands of deaths and millions of dollars of property damage have been caused by earthquakes in the last century. Similarly, on December 26, 2003 an earthquake in Southeastern Iran killed at least 30,000 people, injured 30,000 others, and caused damage or complete destruction to 85% of buildings in the Bam area.

Clearly, an exchange of ideas by international experts on methods of improved prediction and preparation for earthquakes and the minimization of death and destruction is needed. Unfortunately, the San Jose Mercury News described what appears to be a U.S. government policy that opposes the exchange of scientific information that may be lifesaving.

Here's what the Mercury News reported: Out of approximately 300 Iranians who applied for visas to attend an earthquake conference in Santa Clara, less than half were approved. When these Iranians arrived at U.S. ports of entry, as many as 100 of approximately 120 were denied entry into the U.S. after being told that their visas were revoked for national security reasons. Each was then placed in detention in what was described as "jail-like" facilities, even those who arrived with children. Some spent a night in detention before finally being allowed to return to Iran.

I noted with special concern while reading reports of these incidents that despite the propagation of a blanket policy to deny entry of Iranian foreign nationals at U.S. ports, officials at U.S. consulates and embassies were still granting visas to Iranian nationals. This is glaringly indicative of a lack of communication and coordination between the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State.

I understand the serious danger posed by the current Iranian regime and I have voted for resolutions condemning the Iranian government for violating its international nuclear nonproliferation obligations and for supporting terrorism, as well as a bill to strengthen sanctions against Iran. However, I do not understand why the United States now appears to be equating these Iranian scientists with the hostility posed by their government. Can it be that all these scientists who were issued visas by our State Department were each discovered to be a threat to America during their airplane rides to the United States?

In the past, Secretary Powell has publicly assured me and other Members of Congress that efforts would be made to facilitate the movement of scientists into the United States for conferences and other worthy scientific purposes. It is my further understanding that Secretary Rice has not come to a different conclusion. So far as I am aware, it has never been

U.S. policy to deny foreign scientists, who do not pose a threat to national security, entry for scientific exchanges purely on the basis of disputes, even very serious ones, between our government and the governments of those scientists. Has this policy changed?

I have received alarming reports from American scientists about the great difficulty of hosting top-level scientific conferences in the United States because of the barriers to entry placed upon non-American scientists seeking to participate. In fact, one Nobel Prize winner recently told me that many top level conferences would likely be moved outside of the United States because of these difficulties. At a time when America is focused on competitiveness and our need to maintain our leadership position in science, math and engineering, this cannot be a positive development for America. I have raised this issue repeatedly with both the Department of Homeland Security and Department of State and have been reassured that efforts were underway to solve these problems. Does the attached report of the Mercury News indicate that those efforts have failed?

I look forward to your response to the following questions no later than Friday, August 11, 2006:

- What was the initial U.S. State Department policy on the approval or denial of visas for individuals applying for the Sharif University of Technology Association (SUTA) earthquake conference at the Hyatt Regency Santa Clara?
- Was the policy changed? If so, when and why?
- Were visas for individuals turned away at ports of entry revoked or were they denied entry for other reasons without visa revocations? Did the decision to deny entry mean that the original visa decisions made by the Department of State were insufficient? If so, what were the deficiencies? If not, why were these individuals denied entry?
- How many people had their visas revoked? How many were denied entry for other reasons without visa revocations? What were the reasons for the visa revocations and/or denial of entry for other reasons?
- Why were visas still being granted when others were being revoked and/or individuals were being turned away at ports of entry for attendance at the SUTA conference?
- How many Iranians applied for visas to attend the SUTA conference in Santa Clara?
- How many were granted visas for the SUTA conference?
- How long was each of those turned away at ports of entry held in detention before being returned?
- Under what conditions were they held? What facilities were they in? Were they handcuffed? Were they in jail-like cells? Did they have access to food and health care? Were they free to make phone calls and speak to attorneys and family?
- Were children held in the same facilities as adults? Were they held in separate facilities with their families or were they separated from family? Were children provided different services and care while being detained?

Sincerely,

Zoe Lofgren